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MUSIC ARTICLES

Where Are The World's Best Choirs? Not In America

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TOM HUIZENGA



Conductor John Eliot Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir has been named the best choir in the world by *Gramophone* magazine.

Courtesy of the Monteverdi Choir

With an estimated 42.6 million people singing in American choirs today, there are bound to be a few voices raised in opposition to a new article in the magazine *Gramophone* that hits the U.S. newsstands this week.

Titled "The 20 Greatest Choirs," the article ranks the world's best ensembles, and finds America lacking. There isn't a single U.S. group on the list. Indeed, most of the choirs that made the rankings were British. Which led me to wonder: Are English choirs really that much better than those everywhere else? And why isn't there a single American chorus listed?

To find some answers, I sought out James Inverne, the editor of *Gramophone*, for this e-mail conversation about his choir rankings.

Click here to read the *Gramophone* article (scroll down past the opening essay). And please leave your thoughts in the comments section.

Tom Huizenga (NPR): What gave you the idea to rank the world's choirs in the first place?

James Inverne (*Gramophone*): It seemed to me that there's a real excitement around choirs at the moment, as well as a great feeling of what you might call social relevance. Of course, I'd argue that all great music and art has relevance, but in the U.K. and elsewhere, choirs have been bringing together fractured and disadvantaged communities, acting in some measure as a unifying force in society. So, there have

been various TV shows and the like that have arisen from this, and they in turn have increased that interest.

Also, a couple of years ago, *Gramophone* ran a "World's Best Orchestras" feature that attracted a huge amount of attention in the media and among music lovers. It's still regularly cited pretty well every month, even today. I had been hesitating to run a follow-up, as doing these things for the sake of it can make them seem trivial, but this seemed like the right project and the right time.

Article continues after sponsorship



TH: There seems to be something hardwired in us that craves rankings and Top 10 lists, isn't there? Can we think of this new ranking as a kind of *Consumer Reports* for Choirs?

O Quam Gloriosum est Regnum - Victoria



The Monteverdi Choir earned top spot in Gramophone's "Best Choirs of the World" list. YouTube

JJ: Yes, with a couple of caveats, it's as close as we can get to it with something as non-scientific as artistic performance. We put together a jury of 13 of the world's leading authorities on the subject, so you're getting as informed a balance opinion as it's possible to get. My two caveats though, are that — firstly — I asked the jury to base its voting on recordings above all, given that choirs tend to be more local and travel less

than, say, orchestras. And so there are a couple of magnificent choirs who haven't recorded for a while, such as St. Johns of Cambridge, who miss out because of that. If we ran the poll again in a year St. Johns could well have made it in and made it to a high place. My second slight red flag would only be to point out that the standard here is exceptionally high — we're talking about the elite of the elite — and there are many other choirs who one might justifiably consider in the highest league for choirs. Whoever came in at No. 22 might not have made our published list, but they're still going to be one heck of a choir.

And yes, you're right that we seem to love lists. I think that's partly about wanting to seek out and experience the best, and partly what we Brits would call "pub argument syndrome" — fans of any kind love discussing and arguing over rankings. But that's not a bad thing because it keeps us engaged, and hopefully this will provoke and inspire people to go and discover some wonderful choirs and choral recordings!

TH: You mentioned your previous list of the world's best orchestras. That sparked a bit of controversy, and I'm assuming this choirs list will also. For instance, out of the 20 choirs ranked, there isn't a single American choir. I can hear a collective "ouch" being groaned by many of our 42 million choristers in this country. Why did no American choirs make your list?

Polyphony & Stephen Layton - Lux Aurumque



Another British choir, Polyphony, took second place in the Gramophone rankings. YouTube

JI: Yes, that's an interesting one. There *was* an American contingent on our jury, for the record! I think some of it can be explained by the fact that not many of the leading American choirs seem to record regularly. But I'd also say that there's nothing like the depth of choral tradition in the U.S. that there is in the U.K., thanks to the Anglican church. The sheer volume and intensity of the activities of the church choirs here, the amount of commissioning of new work that occurs and that informs the rest of the repertoire, have become part of the wider culture here. It means, in effect, that you get elite squads of choristers who operate at an almost unbelievably high level every single day.

The American composer Eric Whitacre, who has just emerged as the hot new thing in choral music (by the way, I do recommend his new album *Light and Gold*) contributes a rather fascinating essay to our article in which he suggests specific reasons — having to do with tuning, tone, sight-reading and other factors — why Brit choirs are so far ahead of the pack, and perhaps by implication why Amercian choirs aren't generally in that place yet.

I think — and this is to hugely generalize — that there's something of a view among critics that American choirs have traditionally not been as versatile in terms of tone as some of their European rivals. I remember one conductor recently telling me that the first time he conducted a leading U.S. choir, they didn't really have a tradition of wanting to sing quietly. Partly that's because you tend to get these vast concert halls in America and the temptation is to think that a more slender sound won't reach the back rows, which usually isn't the case.

I do think though that things are changing. I have heard from various conductors in recent years that the major American choirs are becoming more versatile. And certainly they're also recording more. The Handel and Haydn Society in Boston for instance has just started working with the marvelous conductor Harry Christophers, and have made their first CD for a while, a really terrific recording of Mozart's Mass in C Minor.

There are some great choirs in the States though, so I am surprised that some of them didn't make it in.

TH: So, when I first read through the rankings, noticing there wasn't a single American choir in the list, I began thinking, "Well, which American choirs would be in the running?" It's funny, that although I could come up with a few for sure (Chanticleer, who *do* record a lot; the Los Angeles Master Chorale, the nine-time Grammy winning Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, Musica Sacra) the list was rather small compared to my favorite British choirs, a list which is indeed easily three times as long. I even spoke to one of this country's leading choral conductors, and while he chuckled at the rankings, his own list of great American choirs did not come tripping easily off the tongue.

OK, leaving the Americans behind (even with Mr. Whitacre's blessing), the British choirs completely dominated the list. Over half of the 20 choirs — and all of the top five — are British. I'm sure you've had to field the volley: "well, it's a British magazine, they are going to be partial to their compatriots."

JJ: Yes, Chanticleer, above all, was among the choirs I was really surprised didn't make it on the American front. And I'd be the last person to hear a word against them so, if only out of annoyance that they didn't make our list, I think all readers should immediately go out and buy a Chanticleer disc (and the others you mention) to hear what we're missing! That's part of the point of the list — to focus attention on choirs so that not only our top 20 but all fine choirs get talked and argued about and more people discover them as a result.

I'm afraid the "we're Brits waving the flag" charge is a red herring. Our jury included judges from (deep breath) Russia, Germany, America, Brazil and Australia as well as the U.K. and even the non-British judges tended to vote overwhelmingly for British

choirs. Added to which, our best orchestras list of two years ago only saw only a single British orchestra — the London Symphony Orchestra (beaten by orchestras from Holland, Germany and Austria). The reviewers we use are very conscientious, world-leading music reviewers who wouldn't as a matter of principle allow their judgment to be swayed by notions of national pride. It's just that in this case, and for all the strength in the field of countries like Germany and even Estonia and Sweden, the Brits really do show the way. Listen, we're not much good at soccer any more, so it's a good job we still have something to be proud of!



The excellent Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir did not make it on Gramophone's list of the world's best choirs. YouTube

TH: OK, the Brits "rule" the chorale empire. I get it; and frankly, the English choirs listed are amazing. But, should we assume, then, that the rankings imply that a British choir can sing something like Rachmaninov's Vespers better than, say the St. Petersburg Chamber Choir, or the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, two excellent groups (especially the latter) who did not make it on the list?

JJ: I'd never say that a great Russian choir won't bring something uniquely idiomatic to a Russian work or, say, an Italian choir to an Italian work. Have you heard the recent recording of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* under Antonio Pappano? His Academy of Santa Cecilia choir sounds incredible and when I spoke to Pappano about it recently he simply replied, "You don't need to tell them how to sing it, it's in their blood."

So these rankings give an overarching picture of the choirs' general levels. To nail that down more to specifics, our article includes explanations from commentators, conductors and singers about each of the choirs on the list (the conductor Sir Andrew Davis on being an organ scholar for King's College, Cambridge in his early days is a fascinating insight into the busy-doesn't-begin-to-describe-it life of that choir, for instance). We've also included some themed break-out lists, such as "best liturgical choirs" and "top symphony choruses," some of which dip outside of the top 20. But for best performances of individual works I'd recommend the book *Gramophone* publishes, the *Gramophone Classical Music Guide*, which does exactly that. At all good retailers and e-tailers, ahem...

TH: Back to why British choirs are so good. You hinted at it earlier when you mentioned the Church of England. I was talking to Susanna Beiser, a good friend who sings here with the Cathedral Choral Society. She says:

"It's not necessarily some vague "Britishness" either, that makes their choirs so good. I think it's worth pointing out that it's the Church of England. The Anglicans rule choral music. The Catholics, on the other hand, to whom much of the repertoire rightfully belongs, have not sustained their music traditions as well, and their choirs mostly sound bad when they're not doing some guitar mass or something. But even before Vatican II, I don't think they were keeping up. From what I hear, the Church of England is in terrible shape, attendance-wise, and now with the move by a growing number of conservative Anglicans to reconcile with Rome, the choral tradition may end up being the primary contribution of 500 years of English Protestantism."

What do you think of her theory? And how will declining church attendance affect the strong choral tradition in England?

JJ: As a nice Jewish boy, it's hard for me to know too much about the Church of England's internal affairs. But I'm not hearing that the choirs feel threatened. The thing is, that choral tradition has become such a part of British cultural heritage, it has in many ways now transcended its Anglican roots, which are still important to its maintenance but I suspect not quite as crucial as they once were. There's also something else. Aspiring singers, conductors and so on, know that they can get a fantastic grounding in their craft by becoming involved with the leading British choirs. Kings College, Cambridge alone, for instance, has produced in recent times the likes of Andrew Davis, bass-baritone Gerald Finley, tenors Mark Padmore and James Gilchrist

and many more. So the talent is naturally gravitating to the choirs, to the benefit of both. Now where are the Jewish choirs of that level, that's what I'd like to know!

TH: Well, I'm sure you'll be hearing about this "Greatest Choirs" list for some time to come. You may get a few testy letters. You know, the next step you might want to take could be a "Battle of the Choirs" sing-off ... Say, Palestrina at 20 paces, at high noon? What do you say?

JJ: How about the "Dies Irae" from Verdi's Requiem? Wouldn't want to get in the middle of that one!

Tomás Luis de Victoria Arvo Part Eric Whitacre

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